

# briefing

## Colombia

*CSW Visit to Colombia*

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## **1. Purposes of Visit**

1. To research and evaluate reports of persecution of Christians
2. To explore ways of offering effective solidarity and support to the suffering Church in Colombia.
3. To build a network of key and trusted contacts who are able to provide consistent and sound information on a regular basis.

## **2. Summary of Findings**

### *2.1.1. Conflict Related Persecution*

CSW conducted its first fact-finding visit to Colombia in September 2003 after hearing a number of reports that the Church in Colombia has been suffering persecution within the context of the greater conflict in that country and that they are in desperate need of solidarity and advocacy. What the delegation found in Colombia was far more serious and disturbing than expected.

Much of the violence takes place in and around civilian communities – both urban and rural. None of the groups appears to have any hesitation in taking civilian lives and actively seek out non-combatants for threats and acts of aggression if those persons are perceived to be unsupportive of the group in question. The implications of this policy on the Church and especially on church leaders in zones of conflict are extremely serious.

Church leaders who speak out publicly against the violence, injustice, corruption, and the narcotics trade often become instant targets. The assassination of men and women who are successful in persuading other people not to take part in the violence, whether those people are only potential recruits or actually former members of the armed groups who made the decision to defect, has been designated a valid military objective by high-level commanders in each of the armed groups. In addition, Christians who refuse to cooperate<sup>1</sup> with the armed groups that control the areas in which they live have often been forced to leave their homes and now make up a sizeable portion of Colombia's internally displaced population, which numbers anywhere from 1 to 4 million people.

In a clear case of targeted persecution of Christians, CSW was told that in 2000 a high-level member of FARC<sup>2</sup> defected from the armed group. This individual confirmed that an order had been issued from the highest levels of the guerrilla group that from that point on the assassination of Protestant pastors was to be considered a legitimate military objective. Since then over one hundred pastors have been assassinated.<sup>3</sup>

CSW also learnt that in many areas controlled by the armed groups, particularly those areas under FARC control, more than 400 Protestant churches have been forced to close, the pastors commanded to stop preaching or even forced to leave, and local Christians prohibited from praying, singing or meeting in groups of more than two families. As rationale FARC has accused Protestant pastors of being agents of capitalist imperialism and/or working for the CIA. It would appear, however, that they are more worried about containing church growth as the vast majority of Christians refuse to cooperate or take part

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<sup>1</sup> Cooperation can mean not only participating in acts of violence, but also working in the coca fields, other types of forced labour including building of infrastructure, attending indoctrination meetings, and sexual slavery.

<sup>2</sup> The largest left-wing guerrilla group in Colombia – the acronym stands for The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia)

<sup>3</sup> While CSW was in Colombia a report was received that the pastor of a Foursquare Church in Arauca was assassinated by FARC. He was 36 years old, married, and had two small sons. The guerrillas had not permitted the removal of the body or any church leaders to enter the area.

in violence and pastors often instigate, encourage and support this stance. All of the armed groups regularly send members of their groups to attend church services to observe and report on the activities of the church and its members. As a result, pastors and other church leaders must exercise extreme caution in their choice of words and methods of outreach.

It is important to recognise, however, that while FARC has been the armed group most vocally targeting Christians, all armed groups are conducting strategic assassinations of church leaders (both Roman Catholic and Protestant). Christians who are involved in human rights work or peace initiatives are particular targets.

### *2.1.2. Government Discrimination*

As in much of Latin America the Roman Catholic Church maintains a special relationship with the government and as such wields considerable influence. While a constitutional amendment in 1991 allows for “religious equality with liberty” there are still numerous discrepancies in state treatment of non-Roman Catholic religious communities. While the Roman Catholic Church is tax exempt, Protestant churches are often considered commercial enterprises and unless they receive a special exemption from their local government (which they often do not) they are taxed accordingly. Protestant pastors report that their churches have even, on multiple occasions, been accused by both local and high ranking government officials of being fronts for money-laundering operations of the various armed groups in an effort to shut them down or extort money from the individual churches.

Discrepancies also spill over into state institutions like the military and prison system. While the Roman Catholic Church is given a chapel in every prison and responsibility for providing spiritual guidance to military units, Protestants and other faiths are not accorded the same right. Pastors reported that many Protestant youth who had been forcibly conscripted into the Colombian military have been forced to attend Roman Catholic masses against their will under threat of disciplinary punishment.

Lastly, Protestant leaders protested that while the Roman Catholic Church runs a number of highly regarded universities (as well as primary and secondary schools), universities and seminaries run by Protestant denominations have run into huge obstacles when applying for accreditation. While a few have now received government recognition this remains an ongoing problem.

### *2.1.3. Indigenous and Afro-Colombian Related Issues*

International observers and human rights groups have repeatedly drawn attention to the particular plight of indigenous and Afro-Colombian groups within the conflict. These groups have historically been neglected by Colombian society and particularly by the government authorities. The Colombian constitution allows for the autonomy of these groups but this freedom from government control has also resulted in the severe marginalization of the groups. This in turn means little or no protection from groups or individuals who in a bid to control territory often display a total lack of regard for the human rights of these groups. Many of these groups have asked to be left alone by the armed groups and want no part of the violence. Unfortunately, all of the armed groups, including the Colombia military, have not only disregarded these pleas but have even set up camp on the peripheries of their villages, a move which often puts the inhabitants at the epicentre of any local conflict.

With reference to religious persecution CSW was told that armed groups regularly singled out Christians in these groups for harassment. In some cases, already impoverished communities of indigenous or Afro-Colombian Christians were evicted from their land solely because of their profession of faith. In one example, when FARC guerrillas took

control of land where one particular indigenous group was based, they rounded up the entire village into the middle of the settlement and then asked all of the Christians to step forward, first the children, then the women, and finally the men. They were told to leave the settlement at once and found themselves landless and completely destitute, their community broken. According to Church leaders who work with these groups, such cases are not uncommon.

### 3. Introduction to Overall Situation

Colombia has been torn apart by violence for the past four decades due to the rise of different leftist guerrilla groups, and more recently the rise of right-wing paramilitary armed groups. These groups have lost most of their original ideological base and all employ similar violence and intimidation as they vie for territory – both in terms of land and the narcotics trade. Some, such as the leftist FARC and the ELN<sup>4</sup> have forged “partnerships” as they continue to battle the government, others, like the rightwing AUC have splintered into factions as some accept a ceasefire and others do not and now often fight amongst themselves, as well as against the guerrillas. The Colombian military has itself often taken an ambiguous position in regard to violence between the different groups, and unfortunately, has actually been accused of either passively siding with or actively fighting alongside rightwing paramilitary groups.

### 4. Recommendations

#### To the Colombian government and all armed groups in Colombia:

- While the conflict in Colombia makes the promotion of human rights across the board extremely difficult, CSW believes that it is the responsibility of the Colombian government to act as a model for its citizens by respecting and promoting human rights and dignity for all of its population.
- At the same time, CSW also calls upon all of the armed groups, most of which covet international political recognition, to abide by international standards of human rights and to work actively towards peace.

#### To the European Union, United States and United Kingdom governments:

- CSW calls on the EU, US and particularly the government of Ireland in light of their forthcoming EU presidency, to encourage President Uribe to ensure that human rights are respected by government forces and agents and that religious freedom and equality is guaranteed to all faiths.
- Furthermore, CSW calls on the governments of those countries which have an active dialogue with the different armed groups to use their influence to encourage those groups to respect freedom of conscience and faith in the areas under their control.

### 5. Itinerary

26-31 August	Cartagena
1-2 September	Bogotá
3-4 September	Medellín
4-5 September	Bogotá
6-9 September	San José de Guaviare
10 September	Bogotá to Brussels

<sup>4</sup> The second largest leftwing guerrilla group – ELN is an acronym for the National Liberation Army (Ejército del Liberación Nacional)

## **6. Summary of Meetings**

### **6.1. Cartagena**

While the primary purpose of the visit to Cartagena was to attend the Latin American Christian Lawyer's Network annual conference there – it also provided some valuable opportunities to meet with Christian lawyers in Colombia. A separate report on the conference is available.

### **6.2. Bogotá**

The CSW delegation was able to meet with a number of key and high level Protestant Church Representatives. CSW also met with a member of the Colombian government Ombudsman's office and a representative of the Peace Brigades, a ministry of the Mennonite Church in Colombia. In addition, CSW was able to interview a Christian woman who fled Eastern Colombia after receiving death threats and was currently in hiding in Bogotá. She had worked for many years in local government and because of her faith, she had refused to take part in corrupt practices, engage in witchcraft or have an affair with the mayor, for which he contracted local paramilitary death squads to eliminate her.

### **6.3. Medellín**

While in Medellín CSW attended a meeting facilitated by Open Doors and the Commission for Restoration of Life and Peace at which about 50 pastors from the Antioquia and Chocó regions came together to share their testimonies and experiences of persecution. CSW also met with the regional coordinator for the Commission for the Restoration of Life and Peace (a division of the Colombian Evangelical Council of Churches) and the local representative of the Bible League who regularly delivers desperately needed Bibles and other Christian resources in zones of conflict at great personal risk.

### **6.4. San José de Guaviare**

CSW, accompanied by Pastor Farid Lozada of Bogotá, met with a number of local pastors. CSW interviewed a number of internally displaced Christians, a local government representative and a number of pastors who had fled to relative safety in the town because of persecution in FARC controlled areas.

## **7. Aid**

While this trip was primarily for the purpose of developing links and gathering information it was impossible to ignore the serious needs of individuals and of churches. Many of these people and churches, although desperately poor, showed incredible generosity, opening up their homes, and even hotels to CSW and would not accept payment. Many individuals insisted on donating food, taxi rides, and even small amounts of money to CSW. For this reason, CSW took the money that had been budgeted for these costs and donated it back to the local churches.

## **8. Thanks**

CSW would like to thank all those who made this trip possible through their donations and support. CSW would like to express particular gratitude to Farid and América Lozada and the "Gran Comisión" ministry in Bogotá as they opened their home and accompanied CSW throughout most of the trip. CSW would also like to thank Open Doors, the Commission for the Restoration of Life and Peace, and Zarate Interntional Outreach for the assistance they provided.